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ABSTRACT

A creative drama program for eight secondary school aged severely physically handicapped students is described. The 20-session program is explained to have focused on effective communication through such drama activities as sensory exploration tasks, poetry, pantomime and improvisation. Space and time limitations of the program are cited. (CL)

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A Pilot Program in Creative Growth for Severely Physically Handicapped Secondary Students of the Human Resources School, Albertson, New York: A Descriptive Study

by

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A visitor entering the Human Resources School is struck by the modern facility that services students, K-12. Plants grow within a small enclosed courtyard near the main entrance, and fish swim happily in large tanks. Students hurry from class to class, much as in any school facility. The only real difference between this student body and any traditional or routine student population is that many members are seated in wheelchairs and all are physically impaired in some way. Within the facility which has been carefully designed for the physically handicapped, the students follow a curriculum which is

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similar to other schools. In addition, special gym classes, physical therapy sessions, and supervised swimming provide the students with much needed exercise, while speech pathologists, psychologists, and medical personnel are also available to counsel enrolled students and help meet their needs.

Most secondary students at this school have had little opportunity to experience Speech and Theatre. English classes are quite structured, reading and writing skills are emphasized and little spare time is left for speech experiences. A drama course which is occasionally scheduled is offered only to a few youngsters who are judged in advance to be talented. It was for this reason that, in the Spring semester, 1977, the Department of Speech and Theatre of Herbert H. Lehman College, CUNY and the Human Resources School joined forces to develop a Pilot Program in Creative Drama for secondary students. This program was designed and conducted by Dr. Michael Gamble of Lehman College in conjunction with Dr. Teri Gamble and coordinated through the school psychologist Dr. Ronald Friedman. The program was both unusual and exciting since this was the first time that Creative Drama had been used with physically handicapped students. Ten students were chosen to participate in the Pilot Program. These students met for a total of twenty sessions; during these sessions they explored effective

communication through drama activities. The purpose of this paper is to detail the scope of the program, its advantages and limitations as seen in the Pilot Project, and suggest further directions for work in Creative Drama with the severely handicapped secondary student.

The Program

Ten secondary students from the Human Resources School were drawn from afternoon study halls to participate in the Pilot Program in Creative Growth. Due to natural attrition, i.e., unforseen changes of class schedules and sudden relocation of student's families, the number of students who completed the program was reduced to eight. Of these eight, four were confined to wheelchairs--one suffering from advanced Muscular Distrophy--and four, though not so confined had varied degrees of movement impairment. As in other areas of the student's activities within the school, these students helped each other with various activities when necessary. Nevertheless, the movement capabilities of these students was greatly restricted in comparison to most high school or college classes, and the program of work in drama was adapted to meet the special needs of the group.

The students were informed that during the course of twenty sessions they would explore ways to become more aware of the world around and within them, as well as

ways to communicate their perception of that universe to others through the arts of drama, music, creative writing, audiotape, videotape, and film. Unfortunately, the limited time available for this Pilot Project was not sufficient to permit the inclusion of videotape and film studies. The other facets of the program, however, were explored with success.

The workshop entitled "Workshop in Creative Growth" began by having students assemble a puzzle which read, "What a piece of work is man." This phrase, selected from Shakespeare's Hamlet, served as the underlying theme of the program. Students then discussed three basic components of human learning--the intellectual, the behavioral, and the emotional, and were informed that in this class they would concentrate upon the behavioral and emotional aspects of the learning process. Brian Way's definition of a blind person, "Close your eyes and, keeping them closed all the time, try to find your way out of this room,"[1] was used to illustrate this point. The course focused on aiding students to master their abilities. Exercises involved the five senses, the imagination, concentration, emotions, and the intellect. In order to illustrate the goals of the course in an active manner, students were grouped in

[1]Brian Way, Development Through Drama (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), p.1.

one area of the classroom as if they were in an elevator. The imaginary car rose rapidly to the thirty-fifth floor of a building, but stopped between the thirty fifth and thirty sixth floors. Students were asked: How do you feel? What if the car falls? How can you alert others in the building of your plight? Finally the elevator dislodged itself and rose to the appropriate floor. This basic introductory experience seemed to illustrate many of the concepts--imagination, concentration, group cooperation, etc., that would be considered during the course of the program.

The second meeting began with a brief relaxation exercise. Once loosened up, students were ready to actively participate; they were asked to focus their attention on their senses. They listened to the sounds of the school around them, they listened to their own breathing, and then they began listening to imaginary sounds--machines, jet planes, wind, people close to them. They created brief telephone dialogues. The last portion of the session was devoted to the creation of sounds--haunted house of horror sounds for an imaginary film. Screams, creaking doors, wind, chains, and other appropriate noises filled the classroom as the bell sounded, signaling the end of class.

The third day continued the exploration of the senses by focusing on the visual channel. Students closely examined their classroom, and devised descriptive adjectives to describe their feelings for that space; adjectives such as drab, institutional, warm, and safe were suggested. Finally, while observing a tree outside our meeting room students considered and reacted to James Moffett's poem, "To Look At Anything."

To Look At Anything

To look at anything
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say
'I have seen spring in these
Woods,' will not do--you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
The leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.[1]

Gradually those involved began to realize how little we use our available senses--how much of our world we fail to perceive. It became apparent to them that the effective artist or student of drama must, indeed, be a close observer of his or her surroundings. Only in this way can he or she internalize and eventually translate those perceptions

[1]James Moffett, The Living Seed (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1961).

to and audience with clarity and sensitivity.

The following session, the students translated their observations into Cinquains--structured five line poems which describe an object or event. The first line is a one word title, the second describes that title in two words. Three action words tell about the title in the third line, and the fourth line gives feelings about the title in four words. The final line is a one word synonym for the title. Some samples of the cinquains developed by the group follow:

Dog
Playful, furry
Running in park.
Love, security....firendly, fun.
Puppy!

Pizza
Italian food.
Steaming and delicious
Sloppy, crunchy, oily--gooey.
Sicilian.

Apples
Red, round
Picking from tree
Delicious, scrumptious,
mouthwatering, ripe...
Applepie!

Following the creation of the poems, the students performed their work on audiotape using basic choral speaking techniques.

Touch, taste, and smell were considered and examined during the next few meetings. Class members imagined feeling the sun on their faces. They also recalled the texture of various materials--velvet, silk, and fur. They passed imaginary objects around the circle from participant to participant. Hot potatoes, snakes, kittens, and other materials filled the room. Each student described his or her reaction to the object in a word or two. They played imaginary basketball and hockey. They tossed beachballs and bowling balls around the room. They then tasted imaginary foods such as ice cream and candy. Sour milk contrasted sharply with the sweet tastes. Hot and spicy dishes were contrasted with cold sherberts. They examined how their bodies reacted to these various tastes: "How does your neck feel as you swallow the sour milk? Your hands? Your toes?" Students began to realize that their reactions involved their entire beings. Next, they smelled the room, various foods, perfumes, etc. As a group they pantomimed eating pizza, ice cream and spaghetti, thus giving overt demonstration of their physical reaction to the imaginary stimuli.

Movement and more involved pantomimic activities followed these sensory explorations. The group reacted physically to music of a variety of tempos, performed pantomimes of combing hair, typing, and movement of various machines such as washing machines and airplanes. It was

at this point, approximately the tenth scheduled session, that the time limitations of the Pilot Project became apparent. The movement capabilities of the students was so varied, from adequate movement to the inability to hold a pencil unless placed in the hand by another, that there was simply not sufficient time to examine the myriad movement possibilities of the group. Movement within the group requires tremendous cooperation and planning in order to aid those with drastically limited ability in this area. Though such movement training is important and of value, time available for this project was just too short to allow its exploration in depth. Movement projects which would take minimal time in a normal classroom might require days to coordinate within this setting. For this reason the movement and pantomime work was shortened and the group proceeded to speaking and improvisation projects.

The course description had called for improvising stories--first using audiotape, and later videotape and super eight sound film. The time limitation restricted the scope of the workshop to audiotape or radio drama. These students appeared to need a product or specific goal to work toward in their exploration of improvisation; therefore, a radio or film scenario was suggested as the possible result of their efforts. First students examined the traditional improvisation structure of Who, What, Where,

and Why, i.e., deciding who is in the story (characters), what is happening (plot), where it is happening (setting), and why it is happening (motivation). Initial suggestions for radio dramas included Wheres such as spaceships, ballparks, laboratories, jails, deserts, and gallows. Mad scientists, monsters, judges, criminals, and damsels in distress were set forth as possible characters. Later titles began to emerge: "The Runaway Wheelchair", "The Monster Who Ate the Earth", "The Forgotten Island", and "Skull Hill" were typical.

In subsequent sessions, students began to develop basic structures for story titles. Three such frameworks follow:

Utopia II

A magical city on a mountain in California. The people have little or nothing to do since everything is performed by machines. Finally, these machines rebel, destroying the city. The story ends as a mushroom cloud ascends above the mountain utopia.

The Bionic Dog

This story is about Ben, the Bionic Dog. Unlike most bionic creatures, however, Ben is in bad shape. He is toothless, and has lost his bark. He is a fugitive from justice.

The Adventures of Jeff

Jeff dreams his way through several adventures. In one, he is a deep sea diver hunting for lost treasure. He goes into a cave that has not

been explored in thousands of years. He comes across an old treasure chest. As he removes the lock, a one thousand legged creature jumps out and tries to strangle him. At that moment Jeff wakes up.

Students worked on stories at home, bringing to class materials that ranged from sketchy ideas to fully developed senarios which were several pages in length. After some discussion, the group decided upon four stories to develop through improvisation: "Late One Night", "Skull Mountain", "Hockey Revenge", and "The Haunted House". Since the class had been limited to radio drama, portions of each story were cast, played into a tape recorder, played back and evaluated, recast and performed again. Additional evaluation followed the second performance. This procedure was used on each of the senarios selected by the group members. Representative samples of the scenes have been transcribed from the tapes and are presented here to illustrate work done by the group. It should be remembered that the stories and dialogue were initial attempts on the part of the group members. Time did not allow for rewriting and presentation of a completed radio drama. The excerpts presented here should be viewed as one would view a preliminary sketch by an artist, an early draft of a poem, or an early play rehearsal. No attempt was made to polish the performances and scripts, but rather to stimulate creative ideas through radio drama improvisations.

"Late One Night" is a story of a girl who is on the way home from a friend's house. Her car breaks down on a lonely road. A man appears from the woods and she has no choice but to ask for help.

NANCY
Excuse me sir. Sir! My car broke down. Could you help me with my car?

WILLIAM
No! And if you don't get off my land I'm gonna call the cops!

NANCY
But it's very cold! This place is miles from nowhere!

WILLIAM
Ain't my fault. I didn't make your car break down here on my land.

NANCY
You can't leave me out here to freeze to death! They'll arrest you for murder!

WILLIAM
I don't care. As far as I'm concerned you can stay out here and croak.

NANCY
Listen Turkey! I need help with my car.

WILLIAM
All right, I'll try to help you get it started.

He is unable to do so. Therefore, he offers Nancy the shelter of his house until help can arrive from the nearest town to repair the vehicle.

The story of two young hitch hikers is told in "Skull Mountain". Tim and Eddie are thumbing their way from coast to coast. In the Colorado Rocky Mountains Eddie

falls and breaks his ankle. A young girl picks them up and takes them to her father--a retired physician who lives in a secluded old castle in the mountains. He repairs the leg and gives the young men lodging for the night.

EDDIE
This room is really cold and eerie--I don't like this place at all!

TIM
I don't either.

EDDIE
What kind of books are on that shelf?

TIM
Lets see...Oh, yes. The Black Raven and Shrink Heads.

EDDIE
Let me see that. Look at these illustrations he has marked off. This guy must be a real weirdo!

TIM
Lets get out of here!! (They try the door)

EDDIE
The door's locked! Look over here in this fireplace. There are bones in the fireplace--and they're not chicken bones, either. They're human bones!!

TIM
Oooooh! We must get out of here. Maybe there's a way out behind this statue. Look, it's moving..

EDDIE
Watch out! Don't move the statue. It's opening a trap door!.

The door opens and the boys fall through into a prison where the mad physician begins to perform horrible experiments on them in order to test their endurance.

At the conclusion of the workshop, selected scenes from the various tapes were transferred onto individual cassettes and given to each participant. Although time did not permit work in videotape or film, the students did create a meaningful final product. Each received a tape which indicated the successful result of their group effort.

Results and Implications

The Pilot Program in Creative Growth at the Human Resources School demonstrated the viability of using creative drama techniques with severely physically handicapped secondary students. Students were able to explore their abilities, regardless of their disabilities, and they were all excited by the idea of examining their worlds through the medium of drama. Comments such as, "I didn't know I could do tnat," common in any creative drama group, were more revealing and significant when received from this specialized group's frame of reference. The students found themselves looking beyond their severely restricted world dominated by wheelchairs and television, into themselves and their own perceptions of their environment.

Future programs at the Human Resources School and elsewhere must attempt to minimize the inherent limitations of the Pilot Program. The space available

was minimal and cluttered with an array of furniture. A large open space is essential so that wheelchairs may be moved in more creative and meaningful ways. Theatrical accessories such as lighting and simple scenery would add even more life and vitality to the program. Additional sessions should be scheduled; ideally groups should meet two or three times per week for an enitre academic year; this would allow for a more creative exploration of movement possibilities,. since the group cooperation necessary for creative movement by these students would have had time to develop. Such movement work could lead naturally into pantomime which was another area of drama which received but little emphasis in the Pilot Program. An extended period of sessions would also give time to work with videotape and film--media with which these students identify readily. Film or video festivals could eventually be held to bring the student's work before others in the school. Such devices would also help to document the procedures employed. Such documentation could be used as a training device for teachers of physically handicapped students, whether in special schools such as the Human Resources School, or in mainstreamed traditional classrooms.

Even with the limitations of space and time, students developed interesting and worthwhile ideas for improvisation.

Through drama they explored themselves and the world around them and gained insight into, "What a piece of work is man."